

Webb-Porter House (Dr.
Joseph Y. Porter, II
Home, Commodore Porter
Apartments)
429 Caroline Street
Key West
Monroe County
Florida

HABS No. FL-188

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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. FL - 188

WEBB - PORTER HOUSE

(Dr. Joseph Y. Porter, II Home, Commodore Porter Apartments)

Location: 429 Caroline Street, Key West, Monroe County, Florida.
USGS Key West Quadrangle, Universal Transverse
Mercator Coordinates: 17.418510.2716020.

Present Owner: Mrs. Arthur Poirier and Mrs. Caroline Lang
c/o Mrs. E.L. Newton, 236 Edgewater Drive
Coral Gables, Florida.

Present Occupant: Tenants.

Present Use: Apartment House.

Significance: The house is believed to date to 1838, and to have been built by Judge James Webb, who was the first Federal Judge of the Southern District of the Florida Territory. It is, however, better known as the birthplace and home of Dr. Joseph Yates Porter, II, who was Key West's first native born physician and who became one of the outstanding men in Florida's medical history.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Believed to be 1838.
2. Architect: Unknown.
3. Original and subsequent owners: James Webb in 1837 purchased all of Lot 2, Square 25 (Deed Book B, p. 494). Upon moving to Texas in 1839, Webb mortgaged the property. In 1844, he transferred the mortgage to William H. Wall, who later in that same year gave a quit claim deed for the house and lot to Joseph B. Browne. In 1845, Browne sold it to Joseph Y. Porter (Deed Book D, p. 465). Since that date the property has remained in the Porter family.
4. Original plan and construction: A rectangular two-and-a-half story wooden structure with a two-story veranda extending across the facade.
5. Alterations and additions: Extensive alterations are known to have been made in 1896 by Dr. Porter. It was at that time the mansard roof, Victorian trim and small balconies were added. (Harris Interview, 1962). In 1945, the home was converted into apartments and the back porches enclosed to provide kitchen and bath facilities (Key West Citizen, April 6, 1945).

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

Judge James Webb, the original owner of the property, presided as Judge of the Southern District from 1829 to 1839. During that period he introduced important laws which regulated salvage, thereby making wrecking a legitimate business in Florida. He moved to Texas after leaving Key West and served in many important positions in that government, both in the Republic and in the State. Webb County, Texas is named for Judge Webb. (Webb, pp 873-4).

Dr. Joseph Yates Porter, II, who was born and lived in the house, was a descendent of the distinguished Randolph family of Virginia. He began his career as a surgeon in the United States Army, and upon returning to private practice, became recognized for his medical ability and as an administrator. He was appointed the first Public Health Officer in Florida, serving from 1889 to 1917. His work in controlling Yellow Fever and resolving sanitation problems brought him national recognition. The legislation he initiated in Florida is the basis of many of our present quarantine laws. (Hardy, pp 24-29; Chapin, p. 315).

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: A drawing made in June 1838, by William Adee Whitehead, shows a birds eye view of Key West, and designates a large house as the house being built by James Webb, unfinished. Maloney, Walter C., Sketch of the History of Key West, Florida, The Advertiser Printing House, Newark, New Jersey, 1876.

2. Bibliography:

- a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Monroe County Courthouse Records and Deed Books, Office of the County Clerk, Key West, Florida.

- b. Secondary and published sources:

Cappick, Marie, "The Key West Story," Chapter 25, "Early Homes," Coral Tribune, Key West, Florida, 1957.

Chapin, George M., History of Florida, S.J. Clark Publishing Co., Chicago, 1914, p. 315.

Hardy, Albert V., May Pyncheon, Florida State Board of Health Monograph, No. 7, Jacksonville, Florida, 1964, pp 24-29, also Chapters II, III.

Key West Citizen, Key West, Florida, April 6, 1945.

Webb, Walter P. and Carroll, H. Bailey, The Handbook of Texas, The Texas Historical Association, Austin, pp. 873, 874.

3. Interviews: William Curry Harris, a grandson of Dr. Porter, 317 Whitehead Street, Key West, March, 1962.

Prepared by: Betty M. Bruce
Old Island Restoration
Foundation, Inc.
Project Historian
HABS Key West Project
August 1966

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Eclectic building reflecting the influence of French Second Empire style.
2. Condition of fabric: Excellent.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: A two-and-a-half-story, rectangular building, 46' x 48' x 40' high, with five bays across the front.
2. Foundations: Brick piers.
3. Wall construction, finish, and color: Short, hand-driven siding fastened with wrought iron nails. The siding is painted seafoam with white trim.
4. Structural system, framing: Heavy timber.
5. Porches: A two-story veranda inset under the third floor covers the facade. Heavy timbered posts have elaborate curved wood brackets. Balustrades having a rail with a molded cap and wood palings cut in an urn-shaped pattern surround the veranda on the first and second floor levels and enclose the sides of the front stairway. Small bracketed balconies on the sides at the second floor level are covered by canopies.
6. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Segmental arched, flat topped carved wood molding over front doorway. Double doors have louvered shutters.
 - b. Windows: Carved, flat topped wood moldings above windows at first floor level, carved wood pediments at second story level; windows are covered with louvered shutters.

7. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Mansard covered with V-jointed wood shingles.
- b. Cornice, eaves: Molded wood cornice with carved wood brackets below. Overhanging eaves with plain wood soffits.
- c. Dormers: Closely spaced gabled, pedimented dormers on all four sides.

C. Description of Interior:

Floor plans:

1. Central hall plan on all three floors.
2. Stairways: Front stairway has turned wood balusters, molded hand rail and elaborately carved newel post capped by a carved wood crown and finial.
3. Flooring: Hard wood.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: First and second floors are plastered; the attic has frame walls and ceiling; a molded alabaster cornice with a foliated motif and ornamental bracket surrounds the central stair hall; decorative alabaster center piece in central stair hall.
5. Doorways and doors: Molded architrave trim with rounded corners above doorways off central stair hall; front entrance has molded segmental arch and double doors. Doors are paneled.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: Building faces northwest. It is situated in the old original high section of Key West on a lot with large trees. The property is enclosed by stone walls; grounds are elevated several feet above surrounding elevation. Walks are concrete.
2. Outbuildings: A one-story servants quarters is attached to the main building by an esplanade.

Prepared by: Charles E. McCoy, Jr.,
Architect
Old Island Restoration
Foundation
Key West Project
February 1966

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records were prepared in 1967 during a summer project jointly sponsored by the Old Island Restoration Foundation, Inc. of Key West, and the Historic American Buildings Survey. Twenty-two structures were recorded, ranging from commercial structures, residences and hospitals to a convent, a lighthouse, and the Memorial to the Victims of the Disaster of the U.S. Battleship Maine.

The project was under the direction of F. Blair Reeves, AIA, Associate Professor, Department of Architecture, University of Florida. Measured drawings were prepared by student architects John D. Davenport and John F. Grimm of Texas A. and M. University, and John O. Crosby of the University of Florida. Mrs. Betty M. Bruce of the Old Island Restoration Foundation, Inc., and Professor Reeves were responsible for the historical and architectural data. They were assisted by members of the Foundation. J. Franks Brooks, Photographer, of Key West, supplied the photographs.